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## BELARUS – A LAND OF MULTICULTURALISM?<sup>1</sup>

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### **Introduction: the Soviet Legacy**

For a long period of time Belarusian lands were a part of other states – Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Poland, then Russian Empire and the Soviet Union [Нобік, Марцуль (eds.), 1998]. During centuries the territory of current Belarus was populated by several ethnic groups, with different religious and cultural identities. Many of these groups (for example, Tartars or Jews) spoke their own languages; however, there were no clashes between these groups on the basis of cultural or ethnic differences: in case of intergroup conflicts they always were inspired by the ruling powers that followed the principle “Divide and conquer”. It is this principle of Tsarist Russia that organized Jewish pogroms in Belarus in the beginning of the 20th century, as well as prohibited Catholic churches after the revolt in the 1860s. As for the common people, they peacefully lived together (or close to each other in one settlement) without bloody conflicts, regardless of differences in their genes, religion, or cultural traditions. They communicated in their everyday life, and for this process of communication they have to learn languages of each other or at least use some languages for mutual understanding (like in the 19th c.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper the term “multiculturalism” is applied to the analysis of history of Belarus although it has not been in use there until recently. We use this term to prove that the local people practiced multiculturalism being unknown about it.

people used Russian in the cities not being ethnic Russians, but for practical needs because this language was dominant in the official sphere of life).

Belarusian state was constructed firstly in 1919. It is hardly possible to call it “independent” as this state was formed in the fierce post-revolutionary atmosphere of class struggle: actually, the first Belarusian state was formed in March 1918 under the German occupation, but then, after Germans were gone in late 1918, Bolsheviks founded a new Belarusian state and considered it first; however, this state soon became a part of the Soviet Union and therefore lost even a chance to be independent).

There are many historical interpretations of the Soviet period of Belarus. [Орлов и Саганович, 2001; Zaprudnik, 1993] with rather negative conclusions of the consequences of the Soviet power for Belarusians. However, from the point of view of our topic, multiculturalism, one must agree that the Soviet rule contributed into this process. This contribution can be described as both positive and negative: for the “masses” its influence was positive, while for so called “non-working, alien social elements” it was negative (i.e. exclusive). Official Soviet ideology and the first Soviet Constitution made people of all nations and ethnicities equal as citizens of the USSR (with the exclusion of those without these rights). Therefore, Belarusian population en masse was treated by the Soviet power in the same way as all the people in other Soviet republics. It means there were no privileges as well as no special ethnic pressure to Belarusians (Russification was not applied only to Belarusians, therefore, it is not a “special” method): in the 1930s Belarus experienced starvation, in the 1940s Belarusians actively participated in the war against Nazi’s occupation; in the 1930-1950s they were repressed by Stalin’s regime, and in the late 1980s they suffered from the Chernobyl catastrophe under Gorbachev. However, the people of Belarus inherited multiculturalism from their long previous experience of living together in the same territory [Новік, Марцуль (eds.) 1998].

Actually, the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (it was the official title, according to the Soviet spelling) became a model for other soviet republics to demonstrate how different nations and ethnic groups can live and work together. Therefore, regardless of the Soviet regime, the country, the Soviet Byelorussia, was an attractive place for living for all soviet people. The population of the Soviet Byelorussia differed in ethnic origin, cultural traditions, and even in religion. There were more than hundred different ethnic groups and minorities living in this republic<sup>2</sup>. Some churches were opened and func-

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<sup>2</sup> <http://belstat.gov.by>

tioned even under the Soviet regime (there always existed different churches in the territory of Belarus; although the Soviet power contributed a lot in their destruction, especially in big cities), so that people could practice their religious rituals (religion was separated from the state, but still existed on a private level: only the so called destructive sects were prohibited. It does not mean that the Soviet regime was neutral to religiosity; however, if someone was not a career-oriented person and did not pretend to a relatively high place in the social hierarchy, he or she could attend the church without a fear. Other people preferred to pray at home and did not express their religious beliefs openly. Rural dwellers could go to the church only if there was one in their locality). People were neutral to religiosity of each other in private life, even if they could be atheists in public. They married regardless of the ethnic or religious background of each other.

On a practical level, the historical pre-revolutionary background contributed to interpersonal trust that existed in small villages and towns of Belarus (until the few last decades, most of the population lived in the rural area) and to tolerance that was a necessary part of life in the multiethnic surrounding. However, Soviet practice also stimulated to express tolerance in everyday life among the people.

What are the distinctive features of the Soviet multiculturalism? First, it was limited, mainly, to everyday level of life. Some important spheres (politics, ideology) have never been open to pluralism. Second, it was constructed from above: no officials were interested to ask people what are their needs in pluralism. It was invented to the masses as a consequence of Marxist internationalism (although, as it was mentioned earlier, it had some historical roots in the local traditions). Third, it was mostly a phenomenon of the socio-cultural sphere and connected to the practical ideology of communal life in a village (mainly, pre-revolutionary rural communities) [Кондаков, 2007] However, regardless of these limitations, it helped to keep a society in peace and develop it as culturally diverse. All inter-ethnic clashes were punished or restricted as they contradicted the principle of Marxist proletarian internationalism (and therefore principle of multiculturalism as well). Principle of internationalism, as well as prohibition of ethnic and national discrimination, was written in the Soviet Constitution: it was an official Law. Soviet people were socialized under these principles. In terms of Parsons [Parsons, 1951], internationalism and multiculturalism (although the latter was not called by this name in those days) were the universal norms and values of the Soviet society: they helped to integrate Soviet people as a whole (at least it looked like that).

To summarize:

1. Although Soviet multiculturalism in Belarus was rather restricted and existed more in everyday life (as a practical utilitarian “philosophy of life”) than on top of a society, it was backed by the old cultural traditions of “living together”.
2. Soviet multiculturalism was supported by the official Marxist ideology of proletarian internationalism that provided “rules of game” to prevent open ethnic conflicts in a society. In this case, it was also normatively limited to “proletariat”; however, after the end of Stalinist regime in mid-1950s; when the social structure of the Soviet Union (and the Soviet Byelorussia as its part) almost lost all so called “bourgeois” or “alien” social elements (private owners, self-employed people, clergymen, etc.), the socialist stage of society construction has been announced “reached” (in the 1960s), and all the Soviet people were recognized as citizens with equal rights (again, with the exception of political prisoners, “ideologically alien” individuals, etc.). Since then, multiculturalism was extended to all the population: the unified “Soviet identity” was applied to all citizens.
3. The practice of multiculturalism was broadly supported and propagandized by Soviet culture and especially Soviet literature: it was “international by the essence and national by the form”, according to the official formula. The values of tolerance and human attitude to all people were raised, so that the post-war generation was educated in the spirit of ethnic and social equality in Soviet Byelorussia. The rights of all soviet national cultures to be equally developed and participate in cultural dialogue with each other were recognized (as long as these cultures recognized themselves as socialist by content). This communication enriched the cultures and made them closed to each other, without elimination of them.

Even now, twenty years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the positive elements of historical legacy of Soviet multiculturalism still exist: middle-age and old-age generations in the former Soviet republics know Russian and easily use it as a means of communication in all practical conditions (without any political influence); these generations are still proud of their “soviet education” (comprehensive and international in its content<sup>3</sup>); as usual, these people

<sup>3</sup> Recently, a newly elected President of Latvia, Mr. Andris Berzin'sh, clearly declared in an interview that he would speak all languages he knows when it is appropriate – whether it is English or German or Latvian or Russian. This pragmatic decision was made because of the

do not blame each other or other nations for political crisis, economic problems in their own country as they distinguish between the government and the people; they can easily co-exist (work together, spend free time together) because of respect to other national cultures and ethnicities (some kind of tolerance inherited from the Soviet time still exists in their consciousness and their behavior), etc.

Soviet and post-Soviet multiculturalism in Belarus differs from the one in the EU countries: it refers to the diverse but indigenous citizens of a country while in the most EU countries multiculturalism relates to the relations with migrants. Having in mind this fundamental difference it does not seem relevant to apply any Western theory to Belarus.

It is not by mistake that Zygmunt Bauman called the past Soviet society “the future of Europe” having in mind the European Union and its attempts to build a truly multicultural society within its borders [Bauman 2011: 26]. From his view, there is something in the former Soviet history that the European Union must follow – ideology and practice of “living together”. Bauman disagreed with the thesis of some EU politicians about failure of multiculturalism in Europe; rather, multiculturalism has to be properly developed there in the nearest future.

From this point of view, post-Soviet Belarus can be considered as a “multicultural island” in the great ocean of bloody ethnic conflicts in the global world. Surely, this multiculturalism is also seriously limited as it was the case with the Soviet multiculturalism: it does not include political and ideological pluralism as a necessary feature of a democratic civil society where multiculturalism would presume respect to equal human rights of all citizens [Joas, 2009: 399]. However, political pluralism did not exist in the previous history of Belarus as described above. There was nothing to inherit in this field from the Soviet Union. On the contrary, it was necessary to build political pluralism almost from the start, – a hard task under conditions of Belarusian regime. There is also no pluralism in the sphere of economy in post-Soviet Belarus (one more direct consequence of the Soviet legacy). Nevertheless, multiculturalism is not focused on the economy; it is more stressed on politics, culture, and norms of everyday life. Therefore, in a limited space of culture and eve-

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practical needs (to use Russian among the Latvian people who are in trade with Russians or in the media or in tourism). Unlike the previous Latvian presidents, he rejected political negativism to Russian, and therefore opened a door for other Latvians to use Russian in an open way. To our mind, it is an indirect confirmation of his Soviet legacy and his Soviet multicultural education in a positive way [see <http://news.tut.by/world/229847.html>].

ryday life, it still exists. This situation can be proved by many facts related to the common people. However, it is not visible on the level of the official development in Belarus related to the authorities: they still keep the political power and try to control the whole country. It might be more fruitful to look back to the pre-Soviet period and restore a historical memory of Belarusians focusing on their previous experience. This is our task in the following sections.

We believe that sooner or later Belarusian multiculturalism will be broadly developed, and people of Belarus will finally enjoy freedom of choice in political and ideological sphere, in the economic sphere, as well as in private lifestyle, religion, or language of communication). As the former Belarusian Speaker of the Parliament Stanislau Shushkevich mentioned, the best help of the European Union to develop a civil society in Belarus will be free visas for all citizens of Belarus so that they can come and see a real pluralism and multiculturalism in the West [Шушкевич]<sup>4</sup>.

### **History of Belarus as a background of its multicultural nature**

This section will focus on the history of Belarus and its capital city, Minsk, in order to demonstrate their multicultural nature and restore a historical memory of the past. The second task is to connect this multiculturalism with the specific borderland character of Belarus: this country shares many common features with both East and West; for its own sake it has to be tolerant to both neighborhoods and keep legacies of different kind.

Currently, the Republic of Belarus is a borderland between Russia and Poland from the East to the West, and between the current Lithuania and Latvia and Ukraine from the North to the South. In other words, the whole country, Belarus, including its capital, Minsk, is a new border between the “two Europes” – the EU and the non-EU regions. From the opposite approach, supported by different authors, contemporary Minsk belongs to the East and somehow opposes the idea of “Europe”. To some extent, for purely political reasons, using the well-known theory of Huntington [Huntington, 1996], these authors depict almost “a clash of civilizations” between contemporary Belarus and Poland [Пролесковский, 2011]. However, this contemporary view on Belarus and Minsk is politically biased: it does not reflect their long and contradictory history.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.belaruspartisan.org>

The truth is that Belarusians lands and city of Minsk have been always a borderland, however, from the different sides. Thus, the hidden “border nature” of Minsk was masked by several myths especially constructed and ideologically supported during the last two centuries. This nature must be open for the public from both East and West.

First, during almost six centuries, Minsk was a part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) and Poland and therefore played a role of the “Eastern border” of these states: Minsk was on a border of GDL with Moscow kingdom. As the contemporary historians explain [Бобков, 2006], from the 13th century (according to some sources, since 1242) Minsk became part of the Eastern European state, GDL. After the Lublin Union between GDL and Poland, in 1569, Minsk went on to exist as part of this united, bigger feudal state – the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Afterwards, a Polish community, including government clerks, officers, and craftsmen, settled in Minsk.

That is why during the wars between GDL and Moscow, Minsk was destroyed by the Russian troops. For sure during these centuries Minsk belonged to the Central-European states and shared their cultural identities. Indeed, contemporary Belarus is still situated in the geographical center of Europe, so, there is no surprise that Minsk was a Central-European town with all the cultural consequences.

Second, Minsk was a provincial city in the Russian empire. Since the 19th century (after the third division of Poland), Minsk radically changed its identity and became a Western border of the tsarist Russia, a part of the Northern-Western Kray. Its indigenous culture and even its “written history” have been officially changed by the new authorities. Russian historians and ideologists created a myth about “Slavic brothers” (Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians) and introduced a new name for the country – Byelorussia, – to make it more or less close to Russia – and to stress the similar origins of the people living in Russian Empire in its “new eastern lands”. Russian culture slowly came to Minsk that was shifted into a provincial semi-Russian city, even if it still kept many different features of its western past and still remained multi-ethnic by its composition (like all other cities in this territory, Minsk was half-Jewish in the 19th c., while Lithuanians and Belarusians were small minorities among its citizens<sup>5</sup>) [Терборн, Титаренко, Грищенко (eds.), 2009].

Third, Minsk kept its multicultural nature in the 19th century in many aspects. Thus, although Catholic and Uniate churches were converted into

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<sup>5</sup> See: <http://brockhaus-efron-jewish-encyclopedia.ru/beje/slovník/azbuka.htm>



Orthodox ones, they still looked more as “Catholic”. The toponymy of Minsk kept many historical names of the streets and places that reflected the identity of their previous habitants: Kalvarija, Nemeckaya, Tatarskaya. Being part of the Pale of settlement, Minsk was a well-known Jewish town. According to the first census (1897), Minsk was half-Jewish city, and the number of synagogues was bigger than the number of all Christian churches taken together. Up to 1917, Minsk was a small borderland town in which one can hear Russian, Polish, Jewish, Belarusian, and even German languages. The borders of Russian empire constructed its new identity, but could not totally destroy the previous multicultural and multiethnic identity of Minsk.

Minsk has dramatically changed its image in the Soviet period of its history. It happened twice – after the October 1917 revolution and the soviet reconstruction, and then after WWII. Bolsheviks made Minsk a “western fortress” of the Soviet Union. Before WWII it was populated primarily by Soviet military troops and bureaucracy while after the end of the WWII Minsk welcomed workers from the whole USSR to restore and rebuild the destroyed city. For this reason, its multi-cultural nature (then within the limits of the USSR) was restored and even became more diverse: new ethnic groups inhabited post-war Minsk.

For the last time, Minsk experienced visible changes after 1991, when it became a capital of independent Belarusian state. Minsk population became more homogeneous: proportion of ethnic Belarusians increased more than 10% and reached 81%<sup>6</sup>; however, being an important new border with the EU, Minsk could not but attract the interests of diplomats, businessmen and tourists from the foreign countries. Of course, being a non-EU city, and having a special political reputation related to the “last dictatorship in Europe”, Minsk cannot become as popular as Vilnius; however, it is not as provincial and homogeneous city similar to current Russian cities Pskov and Novgorod (historically, also important borderlands and multicultural places).

The same is Belarus in general: on the one hand, from the EU perspective, it is viewed as a non-European province; on the other, in every small Belarusian village there live people of different ethnicities, speaking different dialects of Russian, Belarusian, Polish or other languages [Мигун и Тихомиров, 2009]. They openly practice their religious traditions and customs. Their names (both family and personal names) can be similar to Poles, Russians, Ukrainians: this fact reflects the historical unity of these nations and the close relationship

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<sup>6</sup> <http://belsat.gov.by>



between the people. The local Belarusian people take multiculturalism of this kind for granted: it is not ideological or political issue, it is not a “theory” to prove or reject; it is their everyday practice. Their political beliefs may differ, but it does not conclude in the ethnic conflicts.

Last but not the least prove of multiculturalism in Belarus is a high level of multiethnic marriages. During the Soviet period Belarus was among the regions with the highest level of such marriages: actually, young people did not care about their ethnicity when married. These marriages always play a significant role in the process of cultural interrelations<sup>7</sup>. According to sociological results, family is the major institution of internalization of cultural values of each ethno-national group, as well as family socialization of the children is the primarily one for the further development of a personality. Therefore, interethnic marriages contribute to intercultural dialogue and mutual enrichment of the cultures [Арутюнов, 1989].

Taking together, the above mentioned features of the previous history of Belarus and Minsk clearly prove their multicultural past. Although this historical heritage for a long time was considered as an obstacle in the process of constructing a strong national consciousness and national identity in Belarus, currently, it can be viewed as a positive condition for becoming a peaceful borderland for the multicultural community of the EU.

### **Multi-Dimensional Influence of Vilnius on Belarusian Multiculturalism**

This section will discuss an important role of Vilnius that it played in the previous common history of two cities, Vilnius and Minsk, - contemporary capitals of two different states but having so much in common in the last centuries.

For several centuries in the Middle Ages Vilnius (Wilno) was a center of a multicultural, multi-ethnic state, the GDL, while Minsk was a small peripheral town in GDL (although a local center and for a long time – the center of a principality). Therefore, Vilnius played a role of a common capital for all the inhabitants of these lands, regardless of their ethnicity. Even during the period of Polish dominance, in the 16-18th centuries, Vilnius was more important for the Belarusian region than Krakow, Warsaw, or any other Polish city.

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<sup>7</sup> According to the views of many authors, the number of interethnic marriages is an indicator of the level of multiculturalism of the population.

This feeling of kinship currently reflects into the frequent trips that citizens of Belarus make to Vilnius<sup>8</sup>. According to the 2011 statistics, more than 3,5 million people annually cross the border between Lithuania and Belarus that connects Minsk and Vilnius. It is a good proof of their close socio-cultural interrelationship.

Inclusion into the Russian empire at the end of the 18th century stopped this trend (however, it was over only in the 20th century). According to the contemporary historical views<sup>9</sup>, in the 19th century Petersburg slowly took the role of a new cultural (however, cosmopolitan) center for the Northern-Western Kray, and therefore a significant diaspora of Belarusians has been living in Petersburg since the 19th century. The so-called Imperial age [Briedis 2008] brought about radical transformations in the post-GDL relationship between Minsk and Vilnius.

First, there was a civilization shift from the Western (or so called Latin, in Huntington's classification) culture to the Russian Orthodox culture. According to Huntington (1996), Russia inherited the legacy of the Byzantine civilization with its quite different values and priorities. The Russian empire assumed the political power and introduced its own rules, criteria, and values that became dominant (at least officially) in the former GDL. The Russian tsar even renamed the country: instead of the GDL, the Northern-Western Kray was invented. It was a direct attempt to use the political and symbolic power of Russian empire to assimilate the former GDL: change its civilization identity by giving a new name. As Pierre Bourdieu explained, «symbolic power is a the ability to construct things by wording» [Бурдьё, 2002: 204] Russian culture was actively promoted in the Northern-Western region of this empire. All the provinces were russified, including the Wilno (as Poles and Russians called Vilnius) and Minsk Gubernias.

The second radical change diminished political role of Vilnius in this region: the former capital of the GDL turned into the capital of a Russian Gubernia. It was a much lower status, as all five gubernia capitals of the Northern-Western Kray (Wilno, Mogilev, Grodno, Minsk, and Vitebsk) were officially endowed with similar rights and duties. Officially, statuses of Minsk and Wilno became equal. However, on the non-official level, Vilnius still fulfilled some cultural functions of a capital city in regard to Belarusian cities of this region. For eth-

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<sup>8</sup> <http://belaruspartisan.org>

<sup>9</sup> *Гісторыя філасофскай і грамадска-палітычнай думкі Беларусі. У 6 тт., т. 1, Эпоха Сярэднявечча* (2008), Мінск, Беларуская навука.

nic Belarusians it was especially important to keep close ties with Vilnius: it remained the only cultural and ethno-national center for them. Some Belarusian intellectuals lived and worked in Vilnius in the 19th century and they always considered Vilnius and this Kray as their motherland.

Third. The Tsarist authorities actively imposed Russian cultural, linguistic, political, and religious models on all citizens of the former GDL, including the Minsk Gubernia. They were not very successful: population kept their religions and ethnic traditions and their languages. The local people in general (including those who lived in Belarusian lands) did not want to break with their previous cultural heritage. During the 19th century the local nobilities and the peasants resisted. Vilnius was an important center of political resistance against the tsarist regime for all segments of the Kray population.

The region kept its multiethnic nature. Let's look at the available data on the urban population of the Northern-Western Kray in 1817. The urban population was officially divided in two big parts – Christian and Jewish. In Belarusian provincial cities the proportion of Christians was 27.2 % among the group of merchants and 21.1 % among the lower middle class (the so-called “meshchane”, or petty-bourgeois). It was much lower than in Ukraine (another territory where Jewish settlements were allowed in the Russian empire). Statistics counted Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians together as Christians. According to calculations by Belarusian historian Pavel Tserashkovich [Церашкoвiч, 2004: 29] based on 19th century Russian statistics, there were only 16.52% ethnic Belarusians among the urban population of Belarusian provinces.

Overall, the proportion of Belarusians among the merchants was 1.89%, and among the meshchane – 20.94%. The total urban population of Belarusian origin was small: it constituted slightly more than 2% of all the Belarusian population in Northern-Western Kray. It was much less than the proportion of urban Lithuanians in the same Kray or the proportion of urban Ukrainians in the Ukraine.

However, the role of Vilnius did remain significant for the construction of the national cultural identity of Belarus. If we compare Vilnius and Minsk within the Imperial period, Vilnius looked more important for the development of Belarusian culture and Belarusian identity. In fact, ethnic Belarusians living in Vilnius felt quite “at home”. When they moved to Minsk, a capital of the neighboring gubernia, they brought along their cultural and symbolic capital cultivated in Vilnius. Actually, Vilnius helped Minsk keep a balance between the Russian influence and the Belarusian historical background inherited from the GDL. People living in Minsk had complex multi-dimen-

sional identities: on the one hand, they were citizens of the Russian empire; on the other, they considered themselves successors of the GDL and kept some previous cultural traditions alive. And, of course, the local population of Minsk (and borderlands in general) also had a special identity: “tuteyshye”. If the Vilnius population was multicultural and multiethnic all the time, the population in Minsk experienced identity segmentation and cultural fragmentation. Nevertheless, the two cities were connected – culturally, historically, and ethnically.

In the beginning of the 19th century Vilnius was a unifying nucleus for the political opposition against tsarist power on the territory of the former GDL. Political circles of all kinds were organized here. Part of the population openly supported Napoleon’s military campaign against Russia in 1812. In 1830-31 several revolts took place in the so-called “former Polish provinces”, including the Wilno Gubernia. In order to cope with these revolts, the Russian tsar closed the university in Vilnius and banned the Uniates. All primary schools and administration institutions were converted from Polish to Russian. Nevertheless, the revolts continued. In the middle of the century Vilnius was a center of struggle against the reforms of 1861-1862 and its consequences for the Northern-Western Kray; some ethnic Belarusians participated in these activities.

Vilnius retained its linguistic diversity, so that Belarusians could live there and share multiculturalism of this place. Being a multiethnic city, Vilnius provided space for development of all ethnic groups - Lithuanians, Poles, Jews, Belarusians, etc. In other words, Vilnius performed a dominant cultural role for these groups and for the smaller cities of this region. In the beginning of the 19th century Russian authorities did not differentiate between population groups in the territories annexed from Poland: they were called Lithuanian-Belarusians.

When mentioning this cultural role of Vilnius we do not mean the role of ethnic Lithuanians in the development of Minsk. Indeed, as Vilnius was a multiethnic city itself, the Polish intellectuals living in Vilnius and the Wilno Gubernia played a major role in the revival of Belarusian culture. In fact, Belarusian culture was developed in the 19th century under the influence of some authors of mixed or Polish origin who, as Włodzimierz Pawluczuk explained [Pawluczuk, 2008: 50], sincerely wanted to help Belarusians develop their national consciousness. They mainly used Latin when composing their poems, songs, and stories (like Frantz’s Boguszewicz). Until its ban as the language of instruction Polish was in common use by educated Belarusians eve-

rywhere in the Northern-Western Kray. The Jesuit academy that existed in Polotsk in 1812-1820 also used Polish (in addition to Latin) as their major language. Sometimes writers wrote in Belarusian using the Latin alphabet (like Wincenty Dunin-Marcinkiewicz – however, he wrote Pinskaya Schlachta in Cyrillic). In any case, all these intellectuals contributed much to the development of Belarusian national consciousness and culture.

To summarize. In the historical period of Russian imperia Vilnius played a significant role in the development of the ethnic consciousness of the people living in the Northern-Western Kray. Although the population of the so-called Belarusian provinces was not totally Belarusian, the latter constituted the core of the population. According to some statistics available from the Imperial period, in 1897 65% of the population in five Belarusian provinces of the Northern-Western Kray were ethnic Belarusian. As Jan Zaprudnik [Запруднік, 1996: 77] stated, 5.4 million out of 8.5 million population were Belarusians. As for their religious characteristics, 81% belonged to the Orthodox Church, 18.5% – to the Roman Catholic Church, and the rest were Old Orthodox believers and Lutherans. It is clear that by the end of the 19th century some serious religious changes were achieved by the authorities in their attempts to convert Belarusians to Orthodoxy and therefore spiritually separate them from Lithuanians and Poles who remained Roman Catholics [Товаров, 1903]. Nevertheless, the population kept their religions, ethnic traditions and even their languages. That is why Vilnius continued to perform its important cultural role in the process of construction of national identities for all the local ethnicities in this region. It also kept its multicultural role for the whole region.

### **Historical multiculturalism of Minsk**

With these “moving borders” throughout the history, Minsk was always a place of living for several ethnic and religious groups, where people of different cultures lived side by side and cooperated. It was a kind of a dialogue of several cultures where different ethnic groups mutually enrich each other through communication and adopted those elements of neighbouring cultures that met their own needs [Квилинкова и Сакович, 2011: 12]. Minsk topography keeps the tracks of this dialogue: the proverbial tolerance of Belarusians reflects the fact that they have been always living among other ethnic, religious, linguistic groups and adjust themselves to this feature.

However, the city landscape does not keep the rich cultural heritage of Minsk – with each political change the city dramatically changed its image and cultural identities: Polish authorities made the population Catholics and Polish-speaking; Russian power converted the people in the Orthodox religion and pushed to speak Russian.

Each new rule tried to eliminate the remnants of the previous one, therefore, Minsk changed its image several times and did not really preserve its past. The contemporary city landscape keeps mainly the Soviet cultural heritage (Stalinist classicism) combined with the new skyscrapers of the recent time [Терборн, Титаренко, Грищенко (eds.), 2009]. Contemporary map of Minsk does not contain the variety of signs of its rich multicultural identities. Minsk is an example of the border cities conquered several times and each time experienced a total cultural destruction and then a full reconstruction.

When speaking about the role of borders we must admit their different influence on Minsk. The borders between Poland/GDL and Moscow kingdom constructed a local identity of the population: instead of being Poles or Litwins, they often called themselves “tuteyshye”. This category was open for all others who might join their locality and become “us”, local.

The Soviet borders divided two political systems and constructed Soviet identity that substituted (or used to substitute) all the previous ones. All the people within these borders were “us” and outside – “them”.

The borders of independent Republic of Belarus contributed in the process of construction of the national identity – Belarusians and therefore selected this nation among the neighbors. This is a creative role of the new state borders. However, they also divided Minsk with some other cities that were close to it due to their historical background (Vilnius, Bialystok). Border with Russia (even half-transparent) also made a division between two nations and stressed the Otherness of Minsk and Belarus, regardless of the previous myths of Slavic brotherhood.

The current European borders play double roles for Minsk: on the one hand, EU borders created a new division that is an obstacle for cultural exchanges and open cooperation. Also, these borders supported by some political and ideological interests, make it difficult for Minsk population to feel more European (identities – more Global than European, while many – local and national).

On the other hand, this is a hope and chance to be a real bridge between civilizations. If Minsk would keep its historical bonds with Vilnius, Warsaw, Riga, it can probably restore its currently almost lost or diminished, but historically known multicultural and border-friendly nature.

Since 1991, Minsk has not changed significantly its “Soviet” image: even going through some transformation; it looks more like a soviet city. However, Minsk is again “on the move” to its uncertain future and necessary new changes. Therefore, it can be considered as a “city on the borders”: between the past and the future, soviet and post-soviet, east and west, etc. For this “borderland nature” Minsk can hardly become a “pure” one-sided city (either East or West): it is destined to exist on the urge of civilizations. This situation made the borders both destructive and constructive for multiculturalism of Belarus and Minsk. However, recently the new political borders rather brought more negative results than positive perspectives for Minsk future development.

### Conclusion

The paper showed that multiculturalism as a phenomenon of everyday life existed in the Soviet Union (although it was accompanied sometimes by severe repressions and experienced ups and downs in its development). Soviet multiculturalism was backed by the Marxist ideology of proletarian internationalism and the Soviet Constitution that prohibited any discrimination against race, nation, or ethnicity.

As a part of the broad Soviet heritage, post-Soviet Belarus kept this limited but practical multiculturalism: it helped to save the country from ethnic clashes, religious battles, and everyday life chauvinism and racism (all of them were often a part of post-soviet development in several other post-communist countries). Until recently, migrants and foreign workers feel safely in Belarus as there is no discrimination against them.

The cultural heritage of the previous (pre-Soviet) centuries of Belarusian history significantly helps contemporary Belarusians to elaborate tolerance and build friendly multicultural atmosphere of everyday life in the country. Historical experience of “living together” was not lost by the population and was cultivated by the part of Belarusian intellectuals in post-Soviet time. It is important to remember that during its long history Minsk was considered as a multicultural city [Бобков, 2006].

All the cultures practicing in Minsk and Belarus exist in a symbolic cultural dialogue. They mutually influence each other in a way that Russian scholar M. Bakhtin [Бахтин, 1986: 430] explained as the following: “The great phenomena in the culture are born only in the process of dialogue of different cultures in the point of their interconnection”. As a result, they are not



disappeared or swallow each other; all of them become richer. In case of Belarus, multiculturalism is a condition of fruitful development of all communities without the cultural domination of the “title nation”.

The latest developments in Belarus and Minsk did not contribute much in this process: being a typical borderland, keeping historical tracks of several nations and cultures, Belarus and Minsk may lose their multiculturalism due to the dominant conservation of one-sided cultural, political and economic perspective. On the contrary, the preservation of Belarusian historical multicultural nature may bring Belarus closer to its neighbours, stimulate the intercultural dialogue and the national development in line with its historical heritage and the contemporary interests of peaceful borderland in Europe.

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**SUMMARY****Belarus – a land of multiculturalism?**

Taking the Republic of Belarus and its capital city, Minsk, as a case study of multiculturalism in the eastern EU borderland, the article presents the historical roots of the multicultural quality of Belarusian society (the complexity of ethnic composition of the population, its religious plurality, and bilingualism). The Soviet period (the Marxist ideology of proletarian internationalism) supported Belarusian multiculturalism on the normative level. In the post-Soviet times the Republic of Belarus has kept this historical heritage (within the limits imposed by the political regime). Currently, neighboring the EU on the East, Belarus can (under certain conditions) further develop its multicultural features and become a peaceful multicultural “bridge” between the East and the West.

**STRESZCZENIE****Białoruś – kraina wielokulturowości?**

Biorąc Republikę Białoruś i jej stolicę, Mińsk, jako studium przypadku wielokulturowości we wschodniej UE pogranicza, artykuł pokaże historyczne korzenie wielokulturowego charakteru Białorusinów (złożoność składu etnicznego ludności, jej religijny pluralizm i dwujęzyczność). Okres sowiecki (marksistowskiej ideologii proletariackiego internacjonalizmu) przyczynił się do wspierania białoruskiej wielokulturowości na poziomie normatywnym. W czasie post-sowieckiej Białorusi przechowywane jest to dziedzictwo historyczne (w granicach ustalonych przez system polityczny). Obecnie, jako wschodnie pogranicze UE, Białoruś może (pod pewnymi warunkami) w dalszym ciągu rozwijać funkcje wielokulturowości i stać się spokojnym „pomostem” między Wschodem i Zachodem.